

FESTSCHRIFT FOR DENIS MICKIEWICZ

Founding Director of the YALE RUSSIAN CHORUS

Testimony: KEN DOVE

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A WORD TO DENIS IN HIS 80TH YEAR

KEN DOVE

I vividly recall my first meeting with Denis Mickiewicz. It was at Bob's Yorkside Restaurant in September 1958. I was brought there by Charlie Neff, fellow member of the Battell Chapel Choir, who had heard from its director, Luther Noss, that there was a tenor in town with a solid high C. The fourth guy there was Jimmy Sloan. That defined for me the challenge of my first encounter with the YRC. I had come to New Haven after singing for three years with the St. Olaf College Choir and had vowed never again to subordinate my studies to participation in such a demanding singing group, which the YRC clearly would be. Of course, I found Denis, Charlie, and Jimmy utterly winning. That is what got my resistance up. I was going to be nothing but a serious student of philosophy. Still, as the conversation unfolded, my fascination increased. At the end it was proposed that I come to Saybrook College a few evenings later to attend a rehearsal of the YRC. I accepted.

That evening changed my life. I found the songs and Denis utterly irresistible. At the end of that evening I signed on for what has turned out to be the next half century of my life. I cannot think of any other decision I have made that has been more important. The songs were first. But I soon came to realize that Denis had put them together in a way that made possible a connection with a dimension of the European experience that I had only known through the novels and plays of Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, and Chekhov.

It is perhaps not irrelevant to add that I had, the previous fall, undergone a life crisis of sorts. Thanks to a fellowship program run at the University of Minnesota called SPAN (Student Project for Amity among Nations), I had spent the summer of 1957 studying the continuities and discontinuities of the German youth movement, from the *Wandervögel*, through the *Hitlerjugend*, to the socialist youth movement of the SPD, *Die Falken*. The main continuities I discovered were in songs, which I learned and sang at tent camps across Germany. This was the focus of the long essay I later wrote up for SPAN on my experience during the summer of 1957. I cannot fail to mention the obvious. In the summer of 1957 I was a twenty-year-old who had grown up in the farm country of western Minnesota (literally, 'Lake Wobegon') with a scant sense of European sensibility.

The encounter that summer with Europe hit me over the head like a hammer. So much so that I was plagued, upon my return to Minnesota, with intense migraine headaches that no doctor could diagnose. This condition lasted until the following October when the Soviets launched their Sputnik. Somehow that relieved my migraines. My thought at the time was that it gave me a sense of perspective on the world from outer space that put things together, removing the primacy of the contrast between America and Europe which had fueled my culture shock and headaches.

Of course, it took a while to fill in the gaps. I was a student of American and European culture. Henry James, Sophocles, Plato, Aristotle, William James, Kant, Hölderlin, Heine, and Whitehead were some of my cultural heroes. But the one event that I look back upon as most important for me was learning the oral tradition of Russian song. And for that the indispensable figure for me was Denis Mickiewicz. Learning and singing the songs was basic. But they also needed a context. And that Denis

provided at seemingly endless gatherings around coffee (without cream: Denis: “Black as my soul”) at George & Harry’s on Wall Street (later Naples).

He, together with John Francis (who epitomized what Denis’ inspiration could do), Vadim Liapunov (who showed what a guitar, a girl, a bottle of wine, and heavy Germanic scholarship lightly thrown off could lead to), Barry Rubin (who literally introduced some of us goyim to the joys of chutzpah), and many other YRC’ers of ’58 ff. were my truest mentors on the continuities of civilization between the American Minnesota where I had grown up, the larger America, and a Europe that came to include Russia, Latvia, and much else as well.

I think what may have been most impressive to me was Denis’ distinctive sense of poetry. When Denis read Pushkin one could hear the music in the verse. Even at the earliest stages of my involvement in Russian 25 during 1959–60 my conversations with Denis made it clear that my persistent early-morning ventures to engage in Russian with his sister and Nina Berberova, and of course Hramov, were not just to prepare for another Soviet adventure in the summer of 1960 but also for a larger voyage of discovery into a cultural world that rightly contrasted itself with ‘the West.’ Of course, I’ve always been theoretically curious and that’s why Denis’ early introduction to me of V. Ivanov and his notion of a novel that could be the counterpart of a drama was blindingly illuminating. Thanks to Denis I also came to read Kingsley Amis’ *Lucky Jim*, Nabokov’s *Invitation to a Beheading*, and Tolstoy’s *Kreutzer Sonata*. I shall never forget our conversations along the way.

As all YRC’ers know, Denis is an unfailing friend. In the spring of 1962 I had been accepted by the Inter-University Fellowship Association located at Indiana University to spend a year of study at the Lomonosov University in Moscow. All that was lacking was an interview in Boston in Russian. Well, my Russian at the time was, to say the least, weak. When I told Denis my problem he immediately proposed that we drive to Boston together, drilling me in Russian all the way. That was, needless to say, most helpful. But perhaps the most helpful thing Denis said that day pertained to a similar interview he had had some years earlier. Asked whether he spoke Russian, he replied “Ni plokha.” His interview was over at once. I was not so lucky, but the Russian chutzpah he conveyed to me was a definite help and I did pass the interview. On the way back to New Haven we had a jolly chat in English.

Thinking back on my delightful early years with Denis I cannot fail to mention our constant competition over girls. Usually he won. But not always. There was, for example, an exceptionally beautiful coed at the University of Rochester, where we sang in the early 60’s. She was torn between us. At a critical moment I pulled out a dirty trick. I mentioned to her that Denis was “very old, perhaps in his 30’s.” That did it.

In the intervening years I have been a practicing professor of European and American philosophy, always eager to discover and articulate civilizational continuities. Over the past twenty or so years this has come more and more to focus upon the relationship between two thinkers I have come to regard as the paradigmatic expositors of ancient and modern European civilization (in which I include America): Aristotle and Hegel. My take on both has been controversial. I would like to think

that it will someday become conventional wisdom, but this would be long after I expire. Meanwhile, I must say that a crucial ingredient into the insight I currently pursue has been the oral nature of cultural transmission that I first learned from Denis and from the songs he arranged and taught us.

The essence of the ancient Greek world was the polis. This was a community held together by a deep-rooted oral tradition that we sometimes call Homer (better: Homers). The notion that Homeric poetry was orally composed goes back to the 18th century. In our century it has been advanced most brilliantly by Milman Parry, Albert Lord and Gregory Nagy (one of John Francis' fellow graduate students at Harvard). But it has taken a long time to sink in. Some, including some of my best friends in classical studies, continue to resist it. Thanks to a long-term conversational and lyrical involvement with Denis, I was able to overcome that resistance and to arrive at an interpretation of Aristotle, and his relationship with Hegel, that might be a decisive element in our understanding of Western, and ultimately, thanks to Hegel, contemporary global civilization.

Denis would no doubt resist association with such a high-minded project. And the project is vacuous short of the posthumous recognition of the Aristotle/Hegel connection that I would like. But it just may come and if it does, I'm sure it would mark yet another dimension of Denis' well-deserved immortality.

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